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Report examines middle grade students in South Carolina

Editor's Note: The report was released today at the Hall of Fame Lobby of the Myrtle Beach Convention Center, during the Middle School Association Winter Meeting. A pdf copy of Caught Between the Lines: South Carolina's Students in the Middle" can be found online at www.sceoc.org. A report, with an extensive collection of data related to middle grade students authored by Dr. Baron Holmes, can be found online as well.

Columbia – Who are middle school students in South Carolina? The South Carolina Education Oversight Committee (EOC) today presented its first report profiling preadolescents and teens in the state. The profile incorporates recent data from a variety of state sources. It presents evidence that in order for middle grade students to reach state and national academic standards, issues related to family, community, culture, healthcare, and other non-school problems that often contribute to poor academic performance cannot be forgotten.

“We have found that students in the middle grades live between the lines,” stated Harold Stowe, EOC Chairman. “They often feel boxed in by the natural changes occurring in their physical and social-emotional development.”

The profile, presented during the winter meeting of the South Carolina Middle School Association meeting, examines middle school students in terms of demographics, health, as well as outside influences such as risk behaviors, student activities, character and ethics, and family relationships. In addition, middle schools in South Carolina and the performance of students and schools are examined within the report.

“This publication is intended to document the seriousness of the challenges facing these young people today,” stated Stowe. “There are areas within our families, our communities, and our

school lives which can and should be altered to address the unique needs of this group of students.”

In terms of academic expectations, students in the middle grades are progressing on a national measure, the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). In 2005, 30 percent of South Carolina eighth graders scored at or above the Proficient level on NAEP in mathematics, compared to 28 percent nationwide. In reading, 25 percent of South Carolina eighth graders scored at or above the Proficient level on NAEP in reading, compared to 29 percent nationwide.

On the state level, however, only a third of middle grade students are scoring Proficient or Advanced on PACT assessments for English Language Arts (ELA), Math, Social Studies, and Science. The goal, outlined in No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, states that 100 percent of students will score Proficient in math and reading by 2014.

In 2005, three percent of middle schools received an Absolute rating of *Excellent*, compared to ten percent of elementary schools.

The report also presents data on influences that often affect academic achievement. Some of the points include:

- Over half (55 percent) of all middle school students scoring *Below Basic* in Math (2001-02 PACT) have special healthcare needs. Almost half (47 percent) of the students scoring *Below Basic* in English Language Arts have special healthcare needs.
- Twenty-seven percent of students in the middle grades state they often or almost always hate being in school and 31 percent state they “never” feel their assigned schoolwork is meaningful or important.
- Over half (52 percent) of students state they felt depressed or sad most days, even if “feeling ok sometimes.”
- Forty-seven percent of eighth graders state their parents have “little or no influence” on them about using alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.
- Forty percent of South Carolina’s middle school students are unsupervised in the afternoons.

Stowe stated that four questions emerged from the profile and he urged attendees to consider these questions:

- How can we as educators and parents improve the health, social, family, and achievement status of these students?
- How can we effectively address the emotional needs of students in the middle grades?
- How can we provide opportunities for adolescents to connect with their schools and communities and establish positive relationships with adults?
- How can we make the coursework more challenging and personally meaningful to students in the middle grades?
- How can we sustain and extend the gains students have made on NAEP, PACT, and end-of-course tests?

“Consider the challenges these bright, exuberant young people face today as well as the successes we envision for them tomorrow,” Stowe concluded. “Most importantly, we must invest personal, professional, and political resources in these students between the lines.”

In the summer of 2004, members of the EOC asked its staff to present a profile of students in the middle grades, as examinations of test performance suggested a decline in academic performance during those years. A draft of the profile was presented to the committee during its annual retreat, in August 2005.

Established by the EAA, the EOC is an independent, non-partisan, 18-member legislative committee made up of educators, business persons, and elected officials who serve by virtue of their elected position or by appointment of the legislature or governor. It bears responsibilities for the development and improvement of SC’s educational accountability system and for making recommendations to ensure the continuous improvement of schools.